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THE
RIGHT AND DUTY
OF
UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS
TO FORM
SEPARATE SOCIETIES
FOR
RELIGIOUS WORSHIP.
A SERMON

PREACHED JULY 22, 1802,
AT
THE OPENING OF THE NEW MEETING-HOUSE AT
BIRMINGHAM,

ERECTED IN THE ROOM OF THAT IN WHICH DR.
PRIESTLEY FORMERLY OFFICIATED, AND
WHICH WAS DESTROYED IN
THE RIOTS, JULY 14,
1791.

BY THOMAS BELSHAM.

Liceat Veritati ad aures vestras pervenire. Scit fe peregrinam in terris agere : inter extraneos facile inimicos invenire : ceterum, genus, sedem, spem, gratiam, dignitatem in cœlis habere. Unum gestit interdum, ne ignorata damnetur.

TERTULLIAN. APOLOG.

LONDON:

SOLD BY J. JOHNSON, ST. PAUL'S CHURCH-YARD ; AND BY
KNOT AND LLOYD, AND BY JAMES BELCHER,
BIRMINGHAM.

1802.

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TO THE CONGREGATION OF
UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS
WHO ASSEMBLE FOR RELIGIOUS WORSHIP
AT THE
NEW MEETING, IN BIRMINGHAM,
FORMERLY UNDER THE PASTORAL CARE
OF
THE REVEREND DR. PRIESTLEY,
THE FOLLOWING DISCOURSE,
PUBLISHED AT THEIR REQUEST,
AS
AN AFFECTIONATE TESTIMONY
OF SYMPATHY IN THEIR SUFFERINGS
AND
OF ADMIRATION OF THEIR ZEAL
IN
THE BEST OF CAUSES,
IS RESPECTFULLY INSCRIBED
BY
THEIR OBEDIENT SERVANT,
THOMAS BELSHAM.

*School of Theology
at Claremont*

THE
RIGHT AND DUTY
OF
UNITARIAN CHRISTIANS
TO
FORM SEPARATE SOCIETIES
FOR
RELIGIOUS WORSHIP.

MY CHRISTIAN FRIENDS,

WE are this day assembled upon a very solemn and interesting occasion: to open a house for the worship of the ONE TRUE AND LIVING GOD, agreeably to the directions of his holy servant and messenger Jesus Christ, in the room of one which upwards of eleven years ago was demolished by lawless violence. Far be it from me, with a rash unhallowed hand, to tear open the wounds which are scarcely closed, or to revive a resentful recollection of those unhappy times, when law and justice, truth and charity, fell unprotected victims to merciless bigotry and to party rage: in consequence of which, one of the greatest philosophers whose

names have adorned the annals of literature and science, one of the most enlightened and exemplary of christian pastors, and one of the best of men, was driven from the bosom of his family, and from all his valuable literary and theological pursuits, and was ultimately constrained to seek for refuge in the American wilderness.

Thanks be to God, the times are now greatly changed: the spirit of conciliation and of peace hath succeeded to the dæmon of discord, of suspicion, of rancour and of wrath. Thousands I doubt not, who were either open and active partisans in these deeds of shame, or who secretly instigated or rejoiced in them, now reflect upon their conduct with remorse and horror; and can hardly believe that it was possible for them to have been actuated by so savage a spirit. And the deluded wretches, if any such remain, who would yet do mischief if it were in their power, are repressed by the vigour of the law, by the vigilance of the magistrate, and by the returning spirit of justice and of liberty. I am even persuaded that the distinguished character to whose sufferings I have alluded might, if he pleased, return in safety, and obtain the complete fruition of his valedictory wish, to end his days in honour and peace in the country which gave him birth*.

* See Dr. Priestley's Fast Sermon, Feb. 28th, 1794, Preface, p. xx.

But

But this is an event not to be expected*. The infirmities of advancing years preclude the hope of so arduous an undertaking. And the many domestic comforts with which he is surrounded, the habits of life which he has formed, the high reputation which he possesses, the intimate friendship which subsists between himself and those great and good men who now conduct the affairs of a vast and enlightened empire, and the various important pursuits, both of a philosophical and a theological nature, in which he is engaged for the instruction of mankind, which must all be abandoned if he should return to this country, may well reconcile his numerous friends and admirers to his continued residence on the American continent, and restrain them from wishing, for their

Dr. Priestley, in a letter lately received, expresses himself upon this subject in the following terms :

" If any thing could tempt me to leave my present situation, " it would be your kind invitation, and for the purpose you mention ". But I am satisfied that the works will be printed here " to more advantage than any where else : and at the same time " I shall not be under the necessity of abandoning my philosophi- " cal pursuits : and if this be done any more, it will be *final*. " My health is something better ; but I have no great hope of " its being what it was before my last visit to Philadelphia, " and I must not act upon the presumption of it. I have given " up all thoughts of seeing you in this world ; may we meet in " a better ! "

* Viz. the supposed advantage of printing his works in England.

own personal gratification, to deprive the philosophical and the christian world of the benefit of his present labours*.

But it is pleasing to reflect, that though the professors and the advocates of Truth are from time to

* The friends of christian truth will be highly gratified by the information, that Dr. Priestley, during his residence in America, has completed that valuable work, his Ecclesiastical History to the present time, and likewise another work not inferior in importance, namely, Annotations upon the Scriptures of the Old and New Testament. These works are already in the press, and will be published with all convenient speed. That venerable advocate for the primitive faith, must surely learn with great pleasure, and must regard it, not only as a striking proof of the high estimation in which his talents and virtues are held by the wise and good in this country, but likewise as an auspicious omen of the future acceptance and usefulness of his publications, that his intention of publishing was no sooner known in this country, than a voluntary subscription to the proposed works was immediately raised among the friends of rational religion, which will completely indemnify the learned author for the expence of printing. That the illustrious nobleman, to whom the christian world is so much indebted for his patronage of Griesbach's edition of the Greek Testament, should have taken the lead upon such an occasion, is no more than might naturally have been expected, from his enlightened and generous zeal in the cause of free enquiry, and to promote sacred literature. I cannot, upon this occasion, refrain from expressing my ardent wish, in common with all the friends of scripture criticism, that the learned professor of Jena would no longer disappoint the eager expectation of the biblical student, by continuing to delay the publication of the remainder of his inestimable work.

time

time removed by death, or laid aside from duty, or transferred to different posts and spheres of usefulness, the great cause to which they are devoted is immortal, and ever growing. The seed which is sown by them is of celestial origin ; and where it has taken root it shall grow, and thrive, and bloom, and bear fruit to everlasting life. This observation has been verified in thousands of instances, and it will, I doubt not, be fully accomplished in this place, and in this christian society. In subservience to which important end, permit me upon this occasion to request your attention to a few observations which I propose to offer from those words of the apostle which are found,

2 COR. vi. 16—18.

And what agreement hath the temple of God with idols ? for ye are the temple of the living God : as God hath said, I will dwell in them, and walk in them ; and I will be their God, and they shall be my people. Wherefore come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord, and touch not the unclean thing, and I will receive you, and will be a Father unto you : and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.

SOON after the apostle had left Corinth, where he had founded a very numerous and flourishing society of christians, the Corinthian church, many of the members of which were but ill instructed

in the principles and requisitions of christianity, began to split into a variety of parties and factions. Some of the new converts, in the heat of their zeal, were disposed to unite the ritual of Moses with the doctrine of Christ, and thus to abridge their christian liberty. These appear to have ranged themselves under the banner of an artful and eloquent teacher, who set himself up in direct hostility to the apostle. Others, on the contrary, seem to have been little better than half christians: at least they were desirous of living upon good terms with their opulent and fashionable heathen neighbours; and with this view they combined the worship of idols with the worship of the living God, and were equally ready to join a party, in a feast upon a sacrifice in a heathen temple, and in the christian eucharist: and upon both occasions they were disposed to eat and drink to a disgraceful excess*. Some indeed pleaded the innocence of the practice, being themselves convinced of the absolute nullity of the heathen gods: while others, in connexion with their christian principles, still retained a tincture of heathen superstition. And in them the idol's feast, and the Lord's supper, were equally acts of religious homage†.

Nevertheless, as some difference of opinion subsisted among them upon this subject, they thought

* 1 Cor. xi. 21.

† 1 Cor. viii. 7.

proper

proper to apply to the apostle for advice ; though, as it appears from the extracts which he inserts from their letter to him in his first epistle to the Corinthians*, they were so well satisfied upon the whole with their own opinions and practices, or they regarded the subject in a light of such indifference, that they hardly thought it a matter of sufficient consequence, or difficulty, to give him any trouble upon the subject. The apostle, however, viewed the case in a much more serious light than they apprehended. And though he wisely discourages superstitious scrupulosity, and allows that in certain cases it might be no violation of christian principles to partake of the flesh of a victim which had been sacrificed to a heathen deity †, he nevertheless strictly prohibits, in the most pointed and explicit terms, all participation of an idol's feast in an idol's temple, as being itself a direct act of idolatry ; which, if it could even be supposed innocent in a person of an enlightened understanding, who was perfectly convinced

* 1 Cor. viii. 1. 4. 6—8. These verses, in which the plural number is used, are evidently extracts from the letter which the Corinthians had written to the apostle, and express their sentiments upon the point in question. The intermediate and subsequent clauses contain the apostle's remarks and animadversions. This clue to the interpretation makes the whole chapter intelligible, consistent, and pertinent to the apostle's design, which would otherwise be obscure and self-contradictory. See bishop Pearce's Commentary upon the place.

† 1 Cor. x. 25. 27.

of the absolute nullity of the objects of popular worship, was nevertheless an act of the most dangerous and ensnaring tendency *. This is the advice which he gives at large in his first epistle to the Corinthian church, which was written at Ephesus in reply to a letter of enquiries which he had received from them. And in this second epistle, written from Macedonia upwards of twelve months afterwards, he takes up the subject again; and after having represented to the Corinthians his own inflexible firmness in the profession of christian truth, and in the execution of his apostolical commission, amidst fatigue, opposition, difficulty, and danger, he again solemnly charges them after his example, at whatever hazard, to withdraw absolutely and totally from heathen worship, the attendance upon which was utterly irreconcileable to christian principles, and in the greatest degree derogatory from their christian character.

“ Be not unequally yoked with unbelievers † :” be not associated with them in their vices, nor in their worship. “ For what fellowship hath righteousness with unrighteousness ? ” How can any one who hath entered himself into the gospel covenant, who is entitled to its privileges, and subject to its obligations, be a proper associate in religious wor-

* 1 Cor. viii. 9. 13. x. 16. 22.

† 2 Cor. vi. 14. See Locke upon the place.

ship with ignorant, vicious, idolatrous heathen? "What communion hath light with darkness?" How can the christian who is instructed in the knowledge of God, in the nature of duty, and in the doctrine of a future life, hold intercourse in a religious service with a worshipper of dead men, the blind deluded votary of dumb and senseless idols? "What concord hath Christ with Belial*?" What point of agreement can there be between the rational simplicity of christian worship, and the absurd mummery, or gross profligacy of the service of an idol temple? "Or what part hath a believer with an unbeliever?" Christians and idolaters have no common principles, and therefore can have no common worship.

"What agreement hath the temple of God with idols †?" You would not surely presume to set up a heathen idol in a temple consecrated to the true God: yet this you in effect do when you join in heathen worship. "For you are yourselves the temples of the living God." You are by profession consecrated to God, and God doth by the holy spirit imparted to you, as it were, take up his residence in you: so that you are in an important and peculiar sense the sanctuary of God. For you therefore to join in idol worship is to profane the house of God: it is to introduce a rival into his living temple, to supplant him in his altar and in

* Ver. 15.

† Ver. 16.

his throne. The language which God is said to have addressed to his antient people the Jews, when he first took them into covenant, he now addresses to you, who by the christian dispensation are introduced into a new and a better covenant. “God hath said, I will dwell in them, and I will walk among them, and I will be their God, and they shall be my people *.” So that you are by profession devoted to God: you are his property, his people, his servants. He has entered his claim to you, and you by your profession of christianity acknowledge his claim: you avow him as your sovereign and your God; the only obje&t of your religious homage, and the centre of your best affections. So that you cannot apostatize to heathen worship without violating your most solemn obligations, and forfeiting your most valuable privileges and hopes.

I do therefore †, continues the venerable apostle, most solemnly charge you in the language of the prophet Isaiah, when he saw in vision the happy release of his countrymen from the Babylonian captivity, “ Come out from among them, and be ye separate ‡.” Break off immediately all your idolatrous connections, and your heathen practices; and, whatever civil intercourse it may be necessary or expedient to maintain with your unconverted neighbours, hold no communion what-

* Lev. xxvi. 12. † 2 Cor. vi. 17. ‡ Isaiah lii. 11.

ever with them in their religious rites. "Touch not the unclean thing." Abstain altogether and without reserve from every act of idolatry, whatever plausible pretences may be suggested for your conformity to them. "And I will receive you." Your heathen neighbours with whom you have been used to associate, and in whose idolatrous banquetings and revellings you have been accustomed to partake, will, no doubt, be offended at your conduct: they will exclude you from their society, and in all probability will revile and persecute you. But, if they reject you, I will receive you. If father and mother forsake you, I will take you up. "And I will be a father to you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty *." I will give you ample compensation for every loss which you may sustain, for every injury which you may endure, for a faithful adherence to truth and virtue, and I will provide an inheritance for you of more value than all the treasures of the earth. The promise which wisdom hath made, omnipotence shall fulfill.

The important conclusion which the apostle draws from the premises he has advanced is this. "Having therefore these promises, dearly beloved, let us cleanse ourselves from all pollution of the flesh and spirit, perfecting holiness in the fear of God †."

* 2 Cor. vi. 18.

† 2 Cor. vii. 1.

That is, in cheerful dependence upon the divine promises, and in obedience to the divine command, let us immediately renounce all idolatrous worship, let us instantly and for ever abjure all those evil practices which are so frequently connected with it; and let us continually aspire after that perfection of character which the gospel requires, and which is the genuine effect of that pure and spiritual worship which it enjoins. Such a conduct will probably cost some temporary sacrifice, but let us rest assured that we shall not ultimately be losers by it.

The application of the apostle's advice to the circumstances of the present occasion is obvious and striking. We are now assembled to open a place of meeting for religious worship, separate from the great body of professing christians in this country, whether of the established church, or among the various descriptions of dissenters: and we justify our conduct upon the same principles upon which the primitive christians vindicated their departure from the worship of their heathen ancestors.

It is not intended to represent the two cases as upon a level. No: very far from it indeed! Heathen idolatry was inseparably connected with vicious practice. It generated the most abominable crimes, perverted the moral sense, and degraded the

the human character. Hence it was that the prophets of the true God were so frequent, loud, and vehement in their declamations against the idolatry of the surrounding nations. Christian idolatry in its worst state, even in the darkest ages of popery, never equalled the enormities of heathen worship, except in those instances, too numerous indeed, in which it taught that the most acceptable offering which could be presented to the God of their adoration consisted in the groans and sufferings of their insulted, persecuted, and slaughtered fellow-creatures. It is but justice to say, that these savage and unchristian practices are greatly corrected even in the church of Rome herself; and the errors of protestant churches, how widely soever they may deviate from the simplicity of christian truth, are not in general directly productive of vice and immorality.

But though the arguments for opening of separate places of assembling for religious worship be not so palpable and glaring under protestant establishments of christianity, as under the public institutions of heathen idolatry, they are nevertheless of great weight, and must command the assent and approbation of all who duly and deliberately consider them.

Different minds are differently constituted and disciplined;

disciplined ; and therefore, arguments which appear of the greatest weight to one are sometimes of little value in the estimation of another, because of the different lights in which they are apprehended, and the different principles and prejudices with which their understandings are imbued.

There are many who call in question the EXPEDIENCE, and even the LAWFULNESS, of all CIVIL ESTABLISHMENTS OF RELIGION, and who entirely disapprove of the interference of the magistrate in ecclesiastical concerns, in every form, and in every degree. And upon this principle, if the very system of faith which they receive, and the very mode of worship which they best approve, were established by law, they must nevertheless dissent from it, because they regard every interference of the civil magistrate, as derogatory from the authority of Christ, the sole head and governor of the church.

It is certain that Christ has no where committed his church to the protection of the civil power, nor is the magistrate placed in a situation which qualifies him to distinguish accurately between truth and error ; and where his decision is erroneous, as it must commonly be, the countenance of the magistrate operates as a premium for the suppression of truth, and the encouragement of error.

error. Also, civil governments being a contrivance of human wisdom for the preservation of the public peace, it may be regarded as a sort of perversion of the public resources to apply them to the support of an exclusive theological system. And if we consider the question as a practical case, and judge of the utility of civil establishments of religion by experience, which is unquestionably the best and safest guide, we shall find in fact, that religion has never succeeded better, or produced more extensive and beneficial effects, than when it has been unprotected, or even persecuted, by the state; and that the interference of the civil power has been, if not the source, at least the main support, of all the corruptions of moral truth, and of those absurd and pernicious doctrines and practices which have deformed and disgraced the christian religion: and above all, it has been the **SOLE CAUSE** of all the savage and sanguinary persecutions which have prevailed in the world. For ecclesiastical anathemas would have had little effect in disturbing the peace of society, had they not been seconded and supported by the secular arm. From these considerations it seems natural to conclude, that all aid to religion from the civil power is useless, and that it has in fact proved highly injurious to the simplicity, the spirit, and the success of the gospel.

Nevertheless, it must on the other hand be admitted, that if Christ has not required, so neither has he absolutely prohibited, the patronage of the civil power ; and many very plausible arguments may be urged in favour of public institutions for the purpose of moral and religious instruction. And I am even ready to concede, that a public system for the instruction of the members of a community in virtue and religion, may be contrived with such wisdom, conducted with such integrity and liberality, and productive of so much benefit to society, that I should cheerfully acquiesce in it, and should not feel myself authorised to dissent from such an establishment, merely because it was an emanation from the civil power.

Again, there are many who separate from a national church, because they apprehend that Christ has instituted a particular form of **ECCLESIASTICAL DISCIPLINE**, different from that which is prescribed by the state. Some, for example, believe that **DIOCESAN EPISCOPACY** is of divine right, and that no person is properly authorised or qualified to administer christian ordinances who has not been ordained by the hands of a bishop. Others contend for the divine origin of the **PRESBYTERIAN** discipline : while others again maintain that Christ has constituted every distinct voluntary society of christians an **INDEPENDENT** church, fully compe-

tent to appoint its own officers, and to regulate its own concerns without any foreign influence or controul.

Upon this ground the puritans of a former age dissented from an established episcopal church. They made no objection to establishments as such; but they contended that their own form of ecclesiastical polity was the only one which made a valid claim to a divine right, and therefore was the only form which the magistrate was authorised to protect and patronize. It was upon this pretence that the episcopalians were put down by the presbyterians, who, for the same reason, were in their turn displaced by the independents.

To me this controversy concerning ecclesiastical discipline has long appeared comparatively trivial. It is the glory of the christian religion, and a presumptive argument of its divine authority, and ultimate universality, that no form of church government, or ecclesiastical discipline, was ever prescribed as of universal and perpetual obligation upon the community of christians. All who profess their faith in the divine mission of Jesus Christ, and who live in the expectation of a future life founded upon the resurrection of their great master from the grave, are the acknowledged members of his visible church. And such persons

are left at full liberty to regulate the external form of the religious societies of which they may be respectively members, as they may judge to be most expedient.

If, therefore, one body of professing christians judge it to be most conducive to christian edification to place the spiritual direction of their several societies in the hands of officers of different ranks and powers, rising in regular gradation, from the parish priest, to the bishop of a diocese, and the metropolitan of a province, or a nation, there is nothing in this order of things which militates against any express precept or injunction of Christ: and while this form of ecclesiastical discipline is recommended upon the ground of expediency, as a human institution, and not imposed as of divine authority, and of indispensable obligation; it would in my apprehension constitute no sufficient ground for separation from a christian community.

If another description of christians should think it expedient, that the pastors of separate congregations should from time to time assemble to consult together for the benefit of their respective churches, and to form rules for their regular discipline; and if the members of those societies are willing to be so directed; if it should be further

thought adviseable that deputations from a certain number of these presbyteries should constitute a synod, and that the representatives of synods should form a general assembly, which should exercise a prudent superintendence over the subordinate meetings; there appears to be no substantial reason, and I am sure there is no scriptural obstacle, to prevent such persons from acting up to their judgement and conviction, and forming a system of ecclesiastical discipline in conformity to these views. It may indeed have its use. It may, from local circumstances, be better adapted to some situations, and to some societies, than any other mode of church government would be. Let those who approve it, adopt it. They have a right to follow the dictates of their understandings in this instance: christianity is a law of liberty: but let them not impose upon the consciences of others, an institution of human wisdom as an ordinance of Christ.

Further, if religious worship is regarded by any number of christians as a business in which all ostentation is to be carefully avoided, and a modest simplicity is to be chiefly consulted: if under these impressions they form themselves into distinct societies, holding, indeed, communion with, but acknowledging no dependence upon, any

other individual or society of christians whatever : if they appoint their own officers and teachers, either from their own body, or from some approved school of learning, and place of previous education ; and if they settle all the rituals of worship and forms of discipline amongst themselves, without recourse to any foreign arbitration : they have a right, as the disciples of Christ standing fast in the liberty with which he has made them free, to act according to their own judgment and discretion in this case ; and to pursue their own schemes without molestation, while they keep within the limits of the public peace. This seems to have been the original constitution of the apostolic churches, and was no doubt well adapted to the infant state of the christian community ; though it cannot be inferred that it was the intention of the founder of the christian faith, that this simple form of ecclesiastical polity should be obligatory upon all the professors of the christian religion to the end of time,

Upon the whole, therefore, where any particular form of ecclesiastical discipline is not imposed as of divine authority, but simply proposed as a matter of expedience, I freely confess, that it would not with me be an argument of sufficient weight, to induce a separation from a national church :

church : and the same observation is equally applicable to the use of unexceptionable liturgies, and public forms of prayer.

These however are the points upon which the principal stress of the argument for dissenting from the established worship of this country, has commonly been laid, and upon which the great majority of those who at this day separate themselves from the national church rest their vindication. They either disapprove of civil establishments of religion as such, or they regard diocesan episcopacy, and forms of prayer, as unscriptural, as a violation of christian liberty, and a restraint upon the holy spirit. Nor ought such objections to be represented as altogether frivolous and weak. For the right of private judgement extends to the importance as well as to the truth of a subject in question : and whatever errors christians may labour under, after having conscientiously employed the best means and opportunities of information, it is their duty to act according to their own views of the case. And if for any reasons which they judge to be sufficient, they cannot in conscience submit to the terms of communion with the national church, they have a right, and as rational and accountable creatures, as christians and as protestants, it is their indispensable duty, peaceably to withdraw,
and

and to worship the God of their fathers in the way which their own judgement and conscience may prescribe.

Nevertheless, it cannot be doubted, that differences of opinion concerning modes of worship are of little consequence in comparison with DIVERSITY OF SENTIMENT with regard to the OBJECT OF WORSHIP : and it is upon this strong ground that we, my friends, who are assembled upon the present occasion, not only claim it as an indefeasible right, but regard it as a duty which we are not at liberty to evade, to withdraw from the communion, not only of the national church, but even of the great body of professing christians ; and to assemble together in separate societies, that we may worship the ONE TRUE GOD in the way which appears to us to be most agreeable to the dictates of reason, and to the instructions of the gospel.

The great mass of what is called the christian world entertain opinions concerning the OBJECT OF RELIGIOUS WORSHIP which to us appear to be unfounded in truth, and unsupported by scripture, and which are even repugnant to the plainest dictates both of reason and revelation. The main body of professing christians believe that there are three equal persons in the unity of the godhead,

godhead, to each of whom we are under equal obligations, and all of whom are equally entitled to our religious homage and worship. Others, acknowledging the holy spirit to be a divine energy, and not a real person, contend only for the equality of the Son with the Father. So that with them there are two persons in the godhead. Some maintain that the Supreme Being first created one great spirit endued with all communicable attributes and powers, and that to this extraordinary person he has delegated the charge of creating, supporting, and governing the universe *, or at least, which is to every practical purpose the same to us, of this district which we inhabit †, leaving to himself, it should seem, no concern but that of an inactive spectator; and requiring that all creatures should bow down to this delegated agent ‡. Others, again, still more remote, if not from

* See Dr. Clarke's Scripture Doctrine of the Trinity, part i. c. 11. p. ii. sect. 26.

† See Dr. Price's Sermons, No. IV. Dr. Price indeed does not allow that the Logos possessed a power of creation from nothing, which he thinks peculiar to omnipotence. P. 144. This, however, is an arbitrary distinction.

‡ Dr. Price denies that religious worship should be paid to this being, who is the delegated maker of the world and its inhabitants. His words are, "It is an essential point of religion 'with me, to worship God only.' P. 143. Dr. Priestley, in his Letters to Dr. Price, admirably points out the inconsistency of denying religious homage to a being who is the Lord our maker,

from truth, at least from probability, have believed that a mere human being, as the reward of distinguished merit, has been exalted to supreme and universal dominion, and is entitled to share in divine honours. So that, in fact, they worship a deified man*.

We, my christian friends, have, I trust, learned a very different lesson concerning the nature and the character of the great object of religious worship. In the phænomena of nature we can discover no traces of more than one governing power, and will, and wisdom. And in the christian scriptures we are expressly taught that “there is ONE GOD, and there is none other but he †;” and “one mediator between God and man, the MAN CHRIST JESUS ‡.”

the former and supporter of all things. Lett. iv. p. 113. 117. Dr. Clarke with greater consistency pleads for the worship of Christ. Clarke's Script. Doctrine, part i. c. 2. sect. 4. part. ii. sect. 50.

* Such was the doctrine of the Polish Socinians. *Christus ad dextram Dei, in celis collocatus, etiam ab angelis adorandus est.* Catech. Eccles. Polon. § 4. *Omnem in celo et in terra potestatem accepit; et omnia, Deo solo excepto, ejus potibus sunt subjecta.* Ibid. Dr. Price justly remarks upon this doctrine, that it not only renders the scripture unintelligible, but christianity itself incredible; and that there is not even in Athanasianism any thing more extravagant. Serm. p. 146. 151. This doctrine is I believe now universally abandoned.

· † Mark xii. 32. ‡ 1 Tim. ii. 5.

Con-

Concerning this illustrious person we believe, as we are taught, that he was “a man approved of God by signs and wonders, and gifts of the holy spirit*;” that he was the greatest of all the prophets and messengers of God †; and that he was commissioned upon an errand of the highest importance to mankind. We believe that he taught the solemn truth, that “there will be a resurrection of the dead, both of the just and the unjust ‡,” when all will be rewarded according to their works §: and that he fully established this doctrine by his own triumphant resurrection from the grave.

We do not believe that Jesus Christ existed before he came into this world. We do not believe that he is God equal with the Father. We do not believe that he was delegated to the office of forming, supporting, and governing the world. We do not believe that he voluntarily assumed human nature to pacify the Father’s wrath, and to make atonement for sin. Highly as we think of the excellence of his character, of the tran-

* Acts ii. 22.

† See Heb. ch. i. where the word *angels* throughout the whole chapter should be rendered messengers: it being the design of the writer to prove the superiority of the founder of the christian dispensation to all former prophets and messengers of God. See Mr. Wakefield’s Translation.

‡ Acts xxiv. 15.

§ Rev. xx. 12, 13.

scendent dignity of his office, and of our unspeakable obligations to him, we do not believe that he is in any sense the object of religious worship ; and we are persuaded that nothing could be more offensive to him now in his exalted, as formerly in his humble state, than to see his professed followers addressing to him that devout homage which he has expressly taught them to pay, and to limit, to that infinite Being, who is “ his Father, and their Father, his God, and their God.” It is therefore impossible that with these views we should unite in worship with any society of christians who address religious worship to any other person than the Father only. We cannot but regard such worship as wholly unauthorized, as irrational, as unscriptural, as antichristian, as in a certain sense even idolatrous. For it is paying divine honours to one whom, however dignified by office or character, we believe to be a mere creature, a human being, a man like ourselves, once compassed with infirmities, and who in his exalted state remains infinitely short of supreme deity. And whatever excuse may be made for unavoidable ignorance, for fixed habits, for early and insurmountable prejudice, such worship as this would in us, who have been taught to correct our errors in doctrine and practice by the standard of the scriptures, be nothing less than a solemn mockery

mockery of God, an insult upon the Lord our maker, a treacherous desertion of truth, a renunciation of the christian faith.

What then is left for us, if we would join in social worship at all, and the importance and obligation of this duty is surely too evident to be called in question, but that we peaceably withdraw from all assemblies of professing christians, whether established by law or otherwise, who hold these erroneous principles, and who adopt these unscriptural practices, and associate with those christians whose judgments are more enlightened upon these important subjects, and who limit their addresses to the one God and Father of all. To us christians is that solemn charge addressed, and O that it may be duly felt, and seriously regarded by us ! “ Come out from among them, and be ye separate, saith the Lord : touch not the unclean thing : and I will receive you : and I will be a Father to you, and ye shall be my sons and my daughters, saith the Lord Almighty.”

I cannot conceive a case more clear and more unequivocal than this. If we are not altogether tied up from enquiring and from judging in the concerns of religion; if we are not absolutely prohibited from professing what we believe, and from acting up to our convictions of duty;

if there be such a thing as the right of private judgment ; if there be such a privilege as liberty of conscience, and religious toleration ; we must be justified in a peaceable separation from the great body of our fellow christians, and approved in forming separate assemblies, and in opening separate places for Unitarian worship.

It has indeed been asked, whether we cannot attend the public services of religion, whether we cannot join in those parts which we approve, and *suspend the assent*, where the understanding, or the conscience is offended. I answer, No : for this would be an unworthy tampering with reason and with conscience, a desertion of truth, and ensnaring of others. The apostle Paul has indeed, in a manner, decided the case. "We know," said the vain Corinthians, "that an idol is nothing in the world," and that "meats are indifferent, and recommend us not to God*." Hence they inferred that they might safely and innocently partake of the offered victim. But what faith the apostle ? Does he approve of this temporizing conduct ? of this occasional conformity ? No. "There is not," faith he, "in all persons, this knowledge †." The weak and the uninformed person does that conscientiously, which you do in appearance only, and by your example he will be seduced into ido-

* 1 Cor. viii. 4. 8. See the note page 7. † Ver. 7, 10, 11.
latry.

latry. Destroy not thy brother, “ for whom Christ died.” And, by parity of reason, if others see you, who acknowledge but one object of worship, joining in a service in which two or more persons are invoked as Gods, they by your example will be encouraged to do the same; and from errors of doctrine and of worship they may be gradually led on to errors of practice, and who can say where it will end? Destroy not then thy brother, for whom Christ died ; and cautiously abstain from a practice which, if it were innocent in you, which it is not, would undoubtedly tend to mislead and to ensnare others.

It has been further objected, that by separation from the great body of professing christians we violate *the peace of the church*. And to this charge, we are constrained, in some degree, to plead guilty. We do indeed avow ourselves to be the disciples of him who declared that he “ came not to send peace on earth, but a sword *.” We infringe the peace of the church, as Jesus himself infringed it, who was charged with blasphemy against God, and treason against Cæsar†. We violate peace as the apostles did, who were “ ringleaders of the hated sect of the Nazarenes ‡,” and who were accused, wherever they went, of “ turning the world

* Matt. x. 34. † Matt. xxvi. 65. John xix. 7. 12.

‡ Acts xxiv. 5, 6.

upside down*." We break the peace of the church as the reformers broke it, when they boldly, at the hazard of their fortunes, their liberties, and their lives, exposed the monstrous errors and blasphemies of the church of Rome, and produced that celebrated schism which comprehends the great body of the reformed church, and which established beyond all controversy, that grand protestant principle which is the foundation of all intellectual and moral improvement, the right of private judgement in the concerns of religion. Peace is good, but Truth is better. And the war of controversy, is more to be desired than the peace of ignorance. It is by discussion only that we elicit truth, which alone will be ultimately productive of honourable, permanent, and universal peace. But though by fair discussion, and by a conscientious separation, we confess that we may be said in some degree to violate the peace of the church, in every other sense we disclaim the charge. Important as we deem those principles to be in which we differ from the body of professing christians, we desire not to promulgate them by any other means than by candid argumentation: and confident in the energy and the eventual triumph of truth, we disdain the mean and unchristian arts of falsehood, calumny, and persecution. The weapons of our warfare are not carnal, but we trust mighty

* Acts xvii. 6.

through God to the demolition of the strong holds of error.

In separating from the great mass of the christian world, we are charged by some with the *guilt of schism*. But surely, if there be any criminality in holding separate assemblies for religious worship, the guilt lies with those who impose and who pertinaciously insist upon unscriptural terms of communion; not with those who remonstrate against them, and who peaceably withdraw when they cannot conscientiously attend*.

The *unity of the church* is by some esteemed to be an object of great importance. But the unity for which they plead was never intended by divine providence: it is itself of no value, and can never exist but in a state of deplorable ignorance, and a total and disgraceful stagnation of the intellectual faculties. From the earliest times, in the primitive age, and even among the apostles themselves, differences of opinion subsisted, and the christian church was divided into parties concerning the perpetuity and universal obligation of the Mosaic ritual †, and probably concerning the observation of the anniversary of the crucifixion and resur-

* See bishop Jeremy Taylor's *Liberty of Prophesying*, sect. 22.

† Gal. ii. 9. 11. 18.

rection of Jesus *. The christian unity which alone is truly valuable is that unity of spirit, that fraternal love, that temper of meekness, charity, and candour, which may subsist among christians who differ most widely in their speculative opinions, and which is diametrically opposite to that flaming, furious zeal, which requires universal uniformity of religious principles, and which denies the name and the privileges of christians to those who differ, however honestly, from its own arbitrary, and commonly, erroneous creed.

It has been said, that the points on which we differ, are *not essential*, and therefore do not lay a

■ The eastern and the western churches both pleaded the authority and example of the apostles, in defence of the different days, on which they observed the paschal feast; the eastern churches appealing to the authority of John, and the western to that of Péter and Paul. Both probably were right. The apostles, not laying any stress upon the exact time in which the anniversary of the resurrection of Jesus was celebrated, might observe it upon different days. This trivial controversy was soon swelled into great magnitude. For though, at the beginning of the second century, Anicetus and Polycarp, when they were unable to convince each other, could nevertheless differ amicably upon the subject, and hold communion with each other; before the conclusion of the same century, the haughty Victor, a successor of Anicetus in the see of Rome, excommunicated all the eastern churches for observing Easter on the wrong day. For which violent procedure, he was very justly and severely reprimanded by Irenæus in an admirable letter, ■ fragment of which is preserved by Eusebius. Eccl. Hist. lib. v. cap. 24.

differ

just foundation for separating ourselves from our fellow christians. But this charge is vague and indeterminate. Is it meant that right apprehensions of the points in question are not necessary to salvation ? Of this perhaps we are not competent to judge. But though we are far from affirming that unavoidable errors in judgement will entail future condemnation, we nevertheless feel a thorough conviction, that truth and honour, unsullied integrity, and christian fortitude, are necessary to inspire us with confidence in the presence of our master and our judge. And while that awful declaration is sounding in our ears, “ If any man is ashamed of me and of my words, of him shall the son of man be ashamed when he appears in his glory *,” we dare not, for any secular consideration whatsoever, dissemble our principles, and spread a veil over christian truth. If the doctrines which we avow be not essential to salvation, the fearless profession of them, when we are convinced of their truth, is, in our judgement at least, essential to honesty and to good sense, to simplicity, consistency, and true dignity of character, to peace of mind and moral improvement, to the approbation of our final judge, and to the success of the gospel in the world.

We know that, by separating ourselves from the

* Luke ix. 26.

great body of christians upon the grounds which have been stated, we incur great reproach. We are represented by many as degrading the gospel and its glorious author, and as denying the Lord that bought us *. We are reviled as schismatics, heretics, and apostates, as deists, atheists, and infidels: we are cast out of the church, we are refused the honourable name of christians, and are represented as disturbers of the public peace, and unworthy of the protection of the civil power. “ So reviled they, so persecuted they the prophets that were before us †:” so rejected they the great Teacher of truth himself, our master, our pattern, and our judge. Therefore, let none of these things move us. If men reproach us, God is witness to our innocence. If our brethren exclude us from communion, and cast us out of their assemblies, God will receive us. If they scorn, he approves: and if they desert us, “ he will be a Father to us, and we shall be his sons and his daughters.” And “ if God be for us, who can be against us ‡ ?” or of what can we be afraid ?

Of civil persecution, the tolerant spirit of the times will not suffer us to apprehend any considerable danger: and the justice of the country, enlightened by experience, will protect the peaceable citizen from lawless violence. But in the intercourses of private life *injuries may still be designed,*

* 2 Pet. ii. 1. † Matt. v. 12. ‡ Rom. viii. 31.

and

and sometimes even *inflicted*, by religious bigotry, or party malevolence. The conscientious votary of christian truth may be excluded from the circle of fashion, and of gaiety. Friends may frown, and forsake him. Bigots may rail and calumniate. And a steady, consistent attachment to unpopular doctrine may be an obstacle to success in a profession, to desirable connexions in life, and to prosperity in the world. But he must be a mean proficient in the school of Christ, and must possess little steadiness of principle, or strength of mind, who can be moved by such considerations as these from the principles and purposes which he has adopted, after mature deliberation, with the full conviction of the understanding, and the entire approbation of the heart.

Having thus established, I trust, beyond all controversy, the right and duty of those who profess the worship of the ONE GOD and FATHER of all, according to the rule prescribed by the ONE MEDIATOR, the man Christ Jesus, to separate themselves from the great body of professing christians, and to form themselves into distinct societies for the purpose of conducting christian worship agreeably to its primitive simplicity and purity, suffer me now, my christian friends, to conclude with a word of exhortation.

In the first place, "Act in this important concern
with

with due deliberation." Let your conduct in this instance be the result, not of the momentary impulse of passion, but of calm dispassionate enquiry, and of sober reasoning. It will then be consistent, dignified, and exemplary.

Further, "Let your separation be peaceable." Give no unnecessary offence. The open avowal, and the resolute defence of those principles which to us appear to be the plainest and most essential truths of the gospel, will to many give great umbrage. This cannot be avoided if we are men of integrity and honour. But let no unnecessary offence be given even to the weakest christian. Do not bring forward unacceptable truths where there is no prospect of doing good. And do not defend the most important doctrines in an unbecoming manner. Use no harsh language. Let it appear that you separate from your brethren from a sense of duty, not from a love of singularity. Be not hasty to resent injuries. Abound in offices of kindness, and, "as far as lieth in you, live peaceably with all men *."

"Be faithful and firm in the cause of christian truth :" and let no secular consideration deter you from professing what you believe, after due enquiry, to be the genuine doctrine of Christ, nor from acting up to the convictions of conscience.

* Rom. xii. 18.

"Let

" Let your conduct be regulated by an active and enlightened zeal." " A candle is not lighted to be put under a bushel *." The christian knowledge which you possess, the mental liberty which you enjoy, the large and comprehensive views which you have acquired, the comfort which you feel, the hopes which you entertain, the high and honourable motives by which your conduct is governed,—these, it is your duty, to the utmost of your power, to communicate to others; and to convince them as you have opportunity, by fair arguments, by calm expostulation, and by exemplary conduct, how much they would gain in knowledge, in devotion, in virtue and in peace, by discarding that enormous mass of errors and corruptions with which the christian doctrine is everywhere encumbered and disgraced, and by embracing and professing christianity in its purest and simplest form. But let zeal, however fervent and active, be enlightened with knowledge, tempered with prudence, and adorned with charity. And do not by unbecoming warmth, and by unseasonable and ill-judged efforts, exasperate prejudice, and defeat your own virtuous design.

" Be thankful for liberty of conscience and for the religious toleration which you enjoy;" and let a dignified loyalty to the constitution of your country, and a cheerful obedience to its laws in all

* Matt. v. 15.

civil concerns, demonstrate, to the confusion of your adversaries and calumniators, that you are worthy of something better than mere connivance, however liberal.

“ Be candid to christians of different persuasions, and whose creed is most opposite to your own.” Let not every one whose religious principles may appear to you to be most obviously irrational and unscriptural, be hastily branded with folly, perverseness, or dishonesty. Such is the debility of the human mind, and such the amazing influence of early and inveterate prejudice, that men of the best hearts, and of the most enlarged and enlightened understandings in other respects, have often entertained the crudest opinions in religion, and such as in other circumstances would have disgraced the understanding of a child. Persons under the influence of religious error, are objects of compassion, not of contempt, and are to be treated with indulgence, not with asperity.

“ Nor are those to be excluded from your charity, who exclude you from theirs.” Uncharitableness is in fact nothing more than error carried to an extreme. These unhappy and deluded creatures really believe that your principles are false and dangerous, and therefore they think it their duty to speak evil of you, to warn others against you, and, in order to exterminate your pernicious doctrines,

doctrines, to arm against you the terrors of the law, or to enflame the passions of a furious multitude. Meekly convince them of their error: enlighten their ignorance: explain your principles: let them see that you hold no doctrines but what are founded in truth, and favourable to virtue: and you will gradually disarm their violence; they will deeply repent of their outrage, and will for the future look up to you with veneration and gratitude, as their most enlightened instructors, their best benefactors, and their kindest friends. But if the contrary should happen, if your adversaries should remain deaf to instruction, and your generous efforts to stem the tide of malignity and prejudice should be wholly unavailing, still let your conduct exhibit an edifying lesson of wisdom and of moderation. “Render to no man evil for evil. “Bless them who curse you. Pray for those who “persecute you. And overcome evil with good*.”

To conclude: “Let your whole deportment be exemplary, and in all respects becoming the gospel you profess.” This will constitute your highest honour, your truest prosperity. This will prove the best vindication of your conduct to yourselves, to your fellow christians, and to your country. This will silence and confound your adversaries. This will console the heart of your late highly revered pastor in his state of exile from his native

* Rom. xii. 14. 17. 21.

land,

land, and under the growing infirmities of declining years *. And this will secure, what is of infinitely greater importance, and without which no undertaking can succeed, no individual can be happy, and no society can prosper, the favour and blessing of Almighty God.

■ Dr. Priestley is now in his seventieth year; and though his health is of late improved, it cannot be expected, according to the common course of nature, that his eminently useful exertions in the cause of science and religion should be continued many years. He often expresses his own expectation that he shall not long survive his best and dearest friend and fellow-labourer, who is ten years further advanced in life, the reverend Theophilus Lindsey,— ■ name that cannot be pronounced by his numerous friends, but with sentiments of veneration and affection, which can hardly be conceived by those who are not intimately acquainted with his truly primitive and apostolical character. They who are desirous of seeing a beautiful transcript of the mind of this excellent man may consult a work which he published last winter, entitled “ Conversations on the Divine Government, shewing that every thing is from God, and for Good to all;” a work of extraordinary vigour, to have been written upon the verge of fourscore. In the elegant language of Dr. Watts,

His is a great, but single name :

Amidst the crowd he stands ALONE....

*Stands yet : but with his starry pinions on,
Dress'd for the flight, and ready to be gone.*

To be favoured with the friendship and correspondence of such characters as these, is an honour greater than mitres and coronets can bestow: and to indulge the hope of the renovation of such friendships in a better and happier state, is a sublime gratification which christianity only can impart. “ Thanks be to God for this unspeakable gift !”

THE PRAYER.

O LORD GOD ! Thy judgements are a great deep.

In the unsearchable wisdom of thy councils, thou hast been pleased not only to permit a diversity of opinions upon subjects of great practical importance to prevail in the christian church, but likewise to suffer that persons who profess to be the disciples of the meek and lowly Jesus, should hate, and persecute, and destroy each other for differences of judgement in articles of faith.

It is thy prerogative, O God, to bring good out of evil : and where we cannot see the end of thy dispensations, we can still confide in thy unchangeable wisdom and goodness, and believe that all shall eventually issue well.

We are thankful for the tolerant spirit of the times in which we live : that we enjoy unmolested that liberty of faith and of worship, which our pious ancestors desired and sought after in vain. We pray that this high and distinguished privilege, may be rightly appreciated, gratefully acknowledged, and duly improved.

Thou, O Lord, knowest the hearts of all men. Thou seest the temper and the views with which thy servants have erected this house to be set apart for the purposes of religious worship and christian instruction. We trust that their motives have been of the purest kind, and such as an omniscient God will approve: that thy servants were influenced, not by the spirit of party and of discord, but by the dictates of a well-informed conscience, and by a commanding sense of duty, that they may profess the faith of Christ, may unite in the worship of the One true God, and may enjoy the benefit of christian ordinances, according to what they apprehend to be the primitive purity and simplicity of the gospel.

And do thou, O merciful God, graciously vouchsafe to bless and to prosper their design as far as it is agreeable to thy holy will. Here may the doctrine of Jesus be taught in its uncorrupted purity! Here may prayers and thanksgivings be offered to the One God and Father of all, according to the instructions of his holy servant and faithful messenger Jesus Christ! Here may christian ordinances be administered in their primitive simplicity! And here may the word of truth be crowned with abundant success, both in the increasing numbers and exemplary conduct of the hearers! In this place may purity of faith and

simplicity of worship be uniformly accompanied with correspondent holiness in heart and life ! And may the professors of genuine christianity be distinguished by love to God, and good will to men ! May all past injuries be cancelled and forgiven ! May the spirit of animosity and violence subside and vanish ! And may there be no strife amongst christians of various denominations, but who shall best exemplify the holy doctrine which they profess, by acts of kindness and charity, and by zeal for good works !

We commend to thy merciful protection thine aged servant, once the pastor of this flourishing society. In the distant region where his lot is now cast, may thy providence be his shield, and thy consolation his support ! Sustain him under the infirmities of declining years. Grant him the unspeakable satisfaction to hear, that they, who once enjoyed the benefit of his christian instructions, and whose best interest lay near his heart, are still walking in the paths of truth and virtue, and followers of him as he was a follower of Christ. And we pray that every remaining exertion to promote the knowledge of christian truth, and the practice of universal virtue, may be crowned with success : that thy servant may rejoice that the evening of life has been employed in promoting the moral improvement of his fellow creatures, and may

triumph in the hope that his works shall long contribute to the progress of the knowledge and spirit of the gospel, when his personal services shall be withdrawn from the world, and from the church.

We pray that this christian society may be supplied from time to time, as vacancies may occur, with faithful "pastors after thy own heart, who may feed them with knowledge and with understanding;" and after having been so long distinguished and blest with a succession of eminent and useful teachers, suffer them not in their present situation to remain destitute. May every breach be healed! May every wound be closed! And may the unity of the spirit be preserved in the bond of peace, and in righteousness of life!

To thy merciful regard we commend thy servant the late pastor of this congregation. We are thankful for the great acceptance and usefulness of his labours in this place. We adore the supreme disposals of divine providence in his removal from this church. We pray that he may still be zealous, ardent, and successful in the defence and propagation of christian truth, piety, and virtue, and that the favour and blessing of the God of heaven may accompany, and guide, and prosper him in all his ways.

We

We pray for our native country, and for the peace of that government under which we enjoy this christian peace. May the king reign in the fear of God ! and may he be happy in the affection of his family, in the love and duty of his subjects, and in the growing peace and prosperity of the nation !

We are thankful for the happy restoration of the invaluable blessing of peace. May the favour of heaven rest upon the peace-makers ! and may no unpropitious event occur to kindle again the flames of war !

Counsel thou the king's counsellors : and may they who have been chosen to be the representatives of the people in the senate of the nation, approve themselves worthy of their important trust, and the vigilant and faithful guardians of the public weal !

To the God of harvest we give thanks for the blessings of the season, and for the unusual abundance of the fruits of the earth. May all the inhabitants of the land participate with joy and gratitude in the bounty of divine providence, and may thankfulness of spirit be manifested in righteousness of life !

May the blessings and privileges, both civil and religious,

religious, which we enjoy, be extended to all the generations of mankind ! and may the knowledge, the spirit, and the power of the gospel universally prevail !

Follow with thy blessing what has now been delivered in thy presence. Dismiss us from this place in peace : fulfilling the desires and petitions of thy servants, as may be most expedient for them: granting us in this world the knowledge of thy truth, and in the world to come life everlasting.

AND NOW, TO THE ONE, ONLY, THE LIVING,
AND THE TRUE GOD, BE ALL GLORY, ADORATION,
BLESSING, AND PRAISE, FOR EVER AND
EVER ! AMEN.

THE END.

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